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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000805

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR S GROFF, D TETER, D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS OF RED CROSS
WORKERS MAKE HEADLINES BEFORE RAJAPAKSA SPEECH IN GENEVA

REF: A. COLOMBO 561
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 733
[1](#)C. COLOMBO 463

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The issue of abductions has again taken center stage in Sri Lanka as President Rajapaksa prepares to travel to Geneva to deliver a speech to the International Labor Organization on June 15 and meet with Louise Arbour. On June 1, President Rajapaksa announced a new committee designed to aid family members of abductees obtain information. However, he also publicly dismissed 90% of reported abduction cases as fictitious, attributing them instead to things such as elopements, tax evasion and foreign employment. Also on June 1, two Tamil Red Cross employees were abducted and killed. Their bodies turned up a day later more than 50 kilometers away. Human Rights Commissioner Jayawickrama told EmbOffs that the government has resolved 880 of the approximately 1100 abduction cases reported in [1](#)2006. But ICRC statistics show there are still hundreds of unresolved abductions cases. The number of such cases increased approximately tenfold from 2005 to 2006; 2007 is on track to be twice as bad as 2006. In a meeting with the Human Rights Minister, the Ambassador urged that the government work with the organizations tracking abductions to reconcile the figures and take the actions needed to stop abductions. End Summary.

NEW COMMITTEE TO HELP ABDUCTEES' FAMILIES

[1](#)2. (C) On June 1 President Rajapaksa met family members of some of those who have disappeared, announcing a new committee to look into inquiries submitted by families regarding their missing relatives. The committee will be coordinated by the capable Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe and will include several members of Parliament

who have been active in calling for action on abductions since many of their constituents were victims. (Previously, families had generally sought information through interventions by members of Parliament or other politicians.)

After President Rajapaksa's meeting with the family members, the Presidential Secretariat issued a statement quoting the President as saying that according to the research of "One-Man Commission" Mahanama Tillekeratne (ref A), nearly 90% of those reported as abducted had returned. The President reportedly added that in "a large number of these cases police records showed that the alleged victims had been domestic servants who left the homes of employers, instances of eloping by lovers, and husbands or wives who left home due to domestic disputes." (Note: The cases Embassy is familiar with do not fit these profiles. Moreover, it appears highly unlikely that the proportion of cases that can be accounted for in this manner even approaches ninety percent.)

TWO RED CROSS WORKERS ABDUCTED AND KILLED

13. (C) Also on June 1, armed gunmen claiming to be police officers abducted two Sri Lankan Red Cross employees from Batticaloa at the Colombo train station. The two Tamil workers were part of a larger group of six Red Cross employees in Colombo to receive training on tsunami relief efforts. They were separated from the other four by the gunmen, who said that they were needed for questioning. The bodies of the workers were discovered the following day in the central town of Ratnapura by the local news affiliate, which displayed the bodies on television. The killings come approximately one week after the government of Sri Lanka

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reassured international NGOs that its workers were safe, despite increasing threats from paramilitary factions.

14. (C) On June 5, 2007, the Daily Mirror published an article quoting police sources stating that they believe the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) or "Karuna group" was responsible for the Red Cross employees' killings. In the same article, TMVP Peace Secretariat Chief Mahesh (ref B) denied TMVP involvement, claiming that the one of the victims, Mahadevan Chandramohan, was his cousin. Mahesh's relationship to Chandramohan, not verified by the Daily Mirror, is doubtful. In any case, Chandramohan probably lived in LTTE-controlled territory until recently when he left to take employment with the Red Cross.

RAJAPAKSA CONCERNED THAT RED CROSS KILLINGS MIGHT HURT GSL'S IMAGE INTERNATIONALLY

15. (C) President Rajapaksa called Ambassador on June 4 and said the killings might have been intended to embarrass him before his trip to Geneva to speak to the International Labor Organization (ILO) plenary on June 15. He noted that there had been similar killings just prior to previous trips abroad. He was unsure who was responsible, but, since investigators so far had found that the abductors spoke Tamil and English, he speculated that they may be involved with either the Karuna group or the splitoff Pillayan faction.

16. (SBU) The Daily Mirror reported on June 6 that President Rajapaksa visited the bodies of the slain Red Cross workers to pay his respects and also met with representatives of the ICRC and the Sri Lankan Red Cross. According to the report, Rajapaksa has given police officials an ultimatum to find "vital clues" leading to the killers within seven days, or he will bring in foreign investigators to solve the crime. The Mirror also quoted Rajapaksa as stating "whoever they are, the purpose is to bring disrepute and embarrass the government."

17. (C) In separate conversations with the President and Human Rights Minister Samarasinghe on June 4, Ambassador

commended the government for establishing the new committee to aid family members of abductees, but asked the latter whether the committee would be able to get results. Samarasinghe conceded that this was "the million-dollar question." He told Ambassador that the report of One-Man Commission Tillekeratne was with the President for review, and offered to brief Ambassador on the main conclusions.

18. (C) On June 5, Poloff met with Member of Parliament and Civil Monitoring Commission Director Mano Ganesan, who pointed out that Colombo's main train station is located in a heavily-guarded, high security zone. Ganesan concluded that abductions carried out there could only occur through police complicity or incompetence. Ganesan opined that the government of Sri Lanka has lost some control over the paramilitary factions it has secretly supported. He argued that the government's willingness to allow paramilitary groups to operate extra-judicially has deteriorated into a general sense of lawlessness among certain segments of society. Ganesan thought it was more likely that the killings were aimed at LTTE supporters who had been targeted for some time with no thought by the perpetrators into the effect it might have on the President's international appearances.

VICE-CHANCELLOR RAVEENDRANATH'S FAMILY
ACCEPTS REPORTS OF HIS DEATH

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19. (C) The abduction and killing of the two Red Cross employees is the highest profile case since the abduction of Eastern University Vice-Chancellor S. Raveendranath who disappeared on December 15, 2006. The family held out hope for Raveendranath's safe return for several months, petitioning President Rajapaksa personally for help. Published media reports state that the family has now accepted that he is dead and are planning a Hindu funeral, even though no body has been recovered. Raveendranath's son-in-law, Dr. Malaravan, told us that he has received information that long before the recent split in the Karuna faction, TMVP military commander Pillayan personally kidnapped Raveendranath on Karuna's orders and killed him after three days of torture in Karuna's Welikanda camp. We also have received a number of second hand reports that Raveendranath was held, and killed, at Welikanda. The family still faces the hurdle of obtaining a death certificate from the GSL before his pension can be released to the widow. Currently, it is taking eight years from the initial police report to obtain death certificates for those who are feared dead, but for whom no body has been recovered.

MFA TOUTS ITS ABDUCTION INVESTIGATIONS

110. (C) The government is working diligently to burnish Sri Lanka's international image. On June 4, Embassy received a diplomatic note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which documents Tillekeratne's investigation into 14 of the approximately 350 abduction cases submitted by the Ambassador to the Presidential Secretariat on March 20 (ref C). According to the note, six persons have either left Sri Lanka or applied for passports since their disappearance. Five have been traced by Jaffna police or have returned home. Two bodies of those on the list have been found with gunshot injuries, and one has been arrested by the army and turned over to the police. The fourteen cases represent, of course, only about four percent of the total we submitted. The diplomatic note also discussed 96 cases submitted by the NGO Asian Human Rights Commission, the status of investigations by the Commission of Inquiry (CoI), the situation of Internally Displaced Persons, the humanitarian situation in Jaffna and other parts of the north and east, humanitarian access and threats to NGOs, and Tsunami reconstruction. The Ambassador urged Human Rights Minister

Samarasinghe to use his new committee to gather information on all previous abductions, investigate them, and most of all put a stop to new abductions.

HRC COMMISSIONER TOES THE PARTY LINE

¶11. (C) According to Colombo Human Rights Commissioner D. Jayawickrama, Tillekeratne has produced a more detailed report in which he disposes of 880 of the more than 1100 abduction cases reported in 2006. Jayawickrama was unable to provide a copy of Tillekeratne's report, saying that we would need to seek the report from Tillekeratne's office rather than from the Human Rights Commission (HRC). Relying on his recollection of Tillekeratne's report, Jayawickrama reiterated the reasons President Rajapaksa cited for the high number of abductions. He also added a few others, including: people attempting to avoid tax liabilities, people defecting to the LTTE or being abducted by the LTTE and people departing for employment abroad without informing their family members.

¶12. (C) Jayawickrama noted that the HRC has ten regional offices throughout Sri Lanka, and that its approximately 170

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employees have access to detainees throughout the country, with the exception of the LTTE-controlled Vanni. When asked if this included detention facilities operated by paramilitaries such as the Karuna group, Jayawickrama said no, because these were not government institutions, adding "but we are in touch with them (the Karuna group)."

ICRC DEBUNKS GSL ABDUCTION CLAIMS

¶13. (C) EmbOffs also spoke to International Committee of the Red Cross protection officer Christoph Sutter (strictly protect) on June 4 to discuss the ICRC's access to detention facilities. Sutter confirmed that the ICRC enjoyed excellent access to GSL detention facilities throughout the government-controlled areas, adding that as far as the police were concerned, the legal procedures for detentions were generally being followed, that treatment was humane, and that instances of mistreatment were quite rare. Exceptions to this were generally attributable to the elite STF police units, the Special Tactics Forces. Sutter stated that he could not be sure the military was following the same rules consistently, noting that the military security forces often used paramilitaries for "special tasks" that they could not carry out themselves. Sutter stated that the ICRC did not have access to paramilitary camps, such as Karuna's base in Welikanda, but that he doubted that the paramilitaries held many prisoners. Instead, he believed that those taken by paramilitaries were either turned over to the army, or more often, killed. Sutter observed that LTTE intelligence operates in government-controlled areas, including the capital, using the same techniques as the government-supported paramilitaries. He thought it reasonable to assume that therefore a small percentage of the abductions and extrajudicial killings in the South might be the work of the LTTE.

¶14. (C) Sutter provided EmbOffs with an internal ICRC document graphing the numbers of disappearances, detentions, international humanitarian law (IHL) violations and child recruitments for 2005, 2006 and the first four months of 2007 (Embassy version of graph e-mailed to SCA/INS). The charts demonstrated that human rights indicators have deteriorated dramatically in every category, with the exception of child recruitment. For example, the ICRC documented 149 disappearances in 2005, 1134 in 2006 and 571 in January-April ¶2007. The graphs also showed 50 IHL violations (such as torture) in 2005, 1064 in 2006 and 677 in the first quarter of 2007. As a result, Sutter concluded that although police appear to be maintaining international standards for

detention procedures, the number of cases falling outside of formal arrest and detention procedures was a "significant problem."

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The GSL is getting the message that the international community is serious about human rights. What is less clear is whether the GSL intends to make a genuine effort to fix the problems. For example, our civil society interlocutors are quick to acknowledge that the number of abductions, especially in Jaffna, fell significantly in the wake of Assistant Secretary Boucher's visit there - but there are indications that the incidence of violations is now rising again. Sri Lanka already has at least three committees, multiple ministries and the HRC, all with mandates to work on human rights issues. We do not share the President's assessment that the killings of the Red Cross workers were meant specifically to embarrass him. It seems more likely that young, unsophisticated Karuna faction thugs were carrying on their usual business of eliminating rivals or suspected LTTE operatives without a thought as to what

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wider ramifications their brutal acts might have. At the moment, the government is involved in a damage control exercise over that incident, and is hoping to avoid embarrassment when the President goes to Geneva. The President's willingness to meet UNHCHR Arbour is encouraging, but much more remains to be done on human rights.
BLAKE